

These rooms saw Countess Žofie Chotková, married to Franz Ferdinand d'Este, heir to the Habsburg throne.

THE HISTORY OF THE CHOTEK FAMILY



If you cross one of the Ústí nad Labem bridges spanning the river Elbe and set out along its Sřtekov bank in the Děčín direction, you will find after some eight kilometres the interesting village of Velké Březno. Its attractions are an almost 250-year-old brewery, by the way, it brews excellent beer, and two mansions. The Baroque one left of the road is three centuries old and is now a home of very old and ill people, but I do not believe that any of us would be in a hurry to live within its walls. We are more likely to be attracted by the other one, picturesque on the dark background of hills, and giving the impression of having just come from a romantic fairy-tale. It is true that when we take a closer look and the initial enchantment vanishes, we may think that we have seen much more splendid mansions built and decorated by masters more illustrious than the builders of the one at Velké Březno. But let us not be critical at first sight and form an opinion when we get to know it better. This mansion is splendid and interesting in a different, calm and graceful way, dreamy and sleepy, and not at all troubled by hundreds of noisy tourists; the atmosphere is appropriate to a country residence. Although small and little known, this mansion saw the last days of a man who took immense credit for the prosperity of his country, the Kingdom of Bohemia, and one of his kin went down in world history. But let us take things in chronological order.

The mansion, one of the smallest in this country, was built in 1842 on com-

mission from Count Karel Chotek, at that time the Supreme Burgrave of the Kingdom of Bohemia, a post tantamount to the governor of the Czech lands, representative of the Austrian Emperor whose empire included the lands of the Czech crown. Count Chotek was remarkable in many respects. His education was excellent. When he completed his studies he travelled in France and Italy, and then held posts at many places of the then Austrian monarchy - he was in turn the governor of Trieste, Venice, and Naples, and held high-ranking posts in Tirol and Vorarlberg, and finally at the imperial court in Vienna. No wonder that when this worldly-wise, intelligent man was named the Supreme Burgrave of the Kingdom of Bohemia he brought to Prague, then a sleepy provincial town, new energy, translated well-devised plans into reality and made the entire country a modern industrial state. He began with the transport network by repairing, improving, and building it. The road from Prague to Karlovy Vary (by the way, he helped modernize the spa and colonnades of Karlovy Vary), the horse-drawn railway from České Budějovice to Linz, and shipping routes on the Vltava and the Elbe were only a few of his projects which shortened distances and facilitated transport in the kingdom. Count Chotek introduced a regular mail service, and arranged the first industrial exhibitions which gave a boost to industrial production and the economy. In Prague, he introduced gas lighting, had streets and squares newly

paved and equipped with sewers which also collected rain-water carried by a new invention, gutters. Since Prague suffered from traffic jams, as all vehicles used Charles Bridge, which was the only bridge spanning the Vltava, Count Chotek had a second bridge built. It was named Chain Bridge, and spanned the river opposite of what is now Národní street with the National Theatre at its end. As the construction proceeded, he had the two bridges linked by a new embankment, now called Smetanovo, since then the most popular promenade in Prague offering a splendid view of the Prague Castle panorama.



Interior of the country residence built by Count Chotek in 1842.



Velké Březno mansion is surrounded by a picturesque park with an arboretum of rare species

This is not by far a complete list of Chotek's publicly beneficial projects. He founded orphanages, organized help to the poor... etc., etc. We would fill many pages if we were to mention all projects bearing Count Chotek's seal. But it need be added that he was an ardent and convinced supporter of Czech national revival, a movement which strove to encourage and uplift the suppressed self-confidence of the Czechs as a historical nation. This was absolutely unusual among other Austrian high-ranking officials who spoke only German.

Such was the founder of Velké Březno mansion. A capable organizer, an erudite man, an upright politician, and an official and representative of state administration par excellence whose prime objective was public benefit, a man of high moral principles. It

was an irony of fate that his success and popularity were thorns in the flesh of many less capable and maybe less upright people. Towards the end of his career, at the age of 60, he was forced to resign under petty pretexts, and retire. Count Chotek left the governor's palace in 1843, and moved to the mansion built one year earlier. The residence is situated in the lovely valley of the Elbe, amidst the picturesque hills of the Bohemian Central Highlands; it is a simple mansion, or rather a large villa, built in the austere Austrian-type Empire style, and surrounded by a small park.

This was where Count Karel Chotek spent his last years and managed his small demesne until his death in 1868. The demesne was divided between his two sons, and less than twenty years later consolidated again in the hands of his only grandson, named Karel after his grandpa. The seven granddaughters of the Chotek demesne founder - one of them, Žofie, will be mentioned later on - married in turn and moved elsewhere. The third Count Chotek to own Velké Březno mansion was a bohemian fond of travelling and amusement, and an excellent photographer - his photos are still to be seen at the mansion. He soon married the beautiful Princess Adelaida, and in her honour planned to modernize and expand the mansion into a grand residence. Chotek had the reconstruction designed, and the drawings showed a splendid large mansion with arcades, towers large and small, and dormer-windows

in the then fashionable style now called neo-Renaissance. The reconstruction was commenced with great optimism in 1885, but the grand plans were soon limited by an unfortunate event. The new Countess Adelaida Chotková left for a holiday in southern France, visited Monte Carlo, gambled, and lost a large portion of the family fortune. Part of the demesne had to be sold and the reconstruction was limited to the central sector of the building, and even so took 25 years - until 1910. Meanwhile, an incredible thing happened. The heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand d'Este, fell in love with one of Bohuslav Chotek's daughters, the mentioned Countess Žofie Chotková. The love was great and mutual, but, unfortunately, unequal in the eyes of the high-ranking nobility. Pleas, threats, and rebukes, "the future emperor and archduke cannot be joined in matrimony with a mere countess", were made in vain. They were married, almost in secrecy, condemned by some and praised by others, in 1900. According to period sources the love-match was extraordinarily harmonic. Žofie became in turn a princess and a duchess, and yet she was not recognized by the court. The couple's happy life at Konopiště Chateau in Bohemia came to an abrupt end in 1914. They were shot dead at Sarajevo during their visit to Serbia, and their assassination precipitated World War I. This was how Žofie Chotková, who spent her young days at Velké Březno mansion, went down in the history of the world.

We have not touched on the fates of the last generation of the Choteks who lived at Velké Březno. They are not as interesting. But here is a suggestion: hear the story of the last Count Chotek, Karel again, and his two sisters Antoineta and Ada, at the mansion, in the rooms in which they lived. You will certainly not be bored or disappointed. You will be shown the cosily furnished interiors, and you will not be taken along tourist routes marked by ropes, but be free to look at antiques, see an interesting exhibition, go to a chamber concert, or just take a seat in the cafe in the courtyard, sip coffee or wine, and enjoy the atmosphere of a small country residence surrounded by a lovely park. Believe me, the mansion at Velké Březno is worth visiting.



You can enjoy the peace of the Choteks' country home also in the mansion cafe